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PESAH (LAST DAYS)

CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND MYSTICAL INTIMACY

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"I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride,"[1] writes Solomon in The Song of Songs, which, despite its graphic eroticism, the traditional Jewish mystical and non-mystical schools take as an allegorical work expressing the love between God (the male voice in the poem) and the Jewish people (the female voice). I mention this in light of an exchange I shared with one of my professors when I was a graduate student. We were sitting in her office. I had shown her one of my poems, which must have taken little risk in terms of subject matter or sexuality. She suggested I use something more fresh and referred me to the steamier moments in The Song of Songs. "But that's a metaphor for the love between God and the Jewish people," I responded. She looked at me through small, fashionable glasses (this was before big glasses made their comeback), rolled her eyes, and said, "Yeah, whatever."

Even if understood on a metaphorical plane, the intimate imagery in The Song of Songs begs unpacking. In his final Chassidic discourse, *"Basi le-Gani,"* Rabbi Yosef Y. Schneersohn *zt"l* does some of this work, drawing on Jewish mysticism, as well as the Midrash and its commentaries, to offer a close analysis of the line I mention above. Echoing earlier sources, Rabbi Schneersohn's discourse infers that this verse alludes to the moment the divine presence entered the Sanctuary upon its completion.

As Rabbi Schneersohn points out, the Midrash underscores that the male voice does not say "I have come into *a* garden," but "*my* garden," which suggests the Sanctuary, and by extension this physical world, is God's true home. The Midrash takes this a step further and adds that the Hebrew word for "my garden," "*le-gani*," recalls the Hebrew word "*liganuni*," "my bridal chamber." According to this reading, the human realm constitutes God's bridal room. The Midrash concludes that the male entry into the female's bridal chamber represents the return of God's revealed presence to His beloved physical realm—a realm from which the Divine Presence had withdrawn when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge. He has now come back to the place He desired all along—His divine bedroom, as it were.

Religious Jewish life's preoccupation with modesty is no secret. It seems fair to ask, then, why a tradition so concerned with modesty so often turns to sexual metaphors? Why, for example, does the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Akiva call the The Song of Songs Judaism's holiest book? And why did male and female figures, often locked in an embrace, stand on the cover of the Ark in the Holy of Holies? The metaphor of sexuality is central to the Jewish mystical tradition. As such, I would like to focus on how this eroticism serves as the underpinning of all of existence and represents the fulfillment of what some mystics see as creation's purpose. Ultimately, I would like to suggest that contemporary poetry constantly engages in something akin to the act of erotic mysticism.

For the sake of clarity, let's identify what we might call three parties. There is God's male attribute, called *Kudsha Berikh Hu*, associated with infinity, a divine light that knows of nothing but God; it does not even know of itself as a discrete or separate existence. It is sublime and absolute spirituality. As rays of light cleave to and shine out of their source, so this male attribute reflects God's infinity.

In contrast, *Shekhinah*, God's female attribute, serves as the vehicle via which God creates and perpetuates the physical world, a world that experiences itself as separate from God. *Shekhinah* represents God's ability to engage with the finite, and sometimes represents the finite itself. The third party, as it were, is *Atzmut*, or God's Essence—God as He exists beyond creation entirely, equally transcending the physical and spiritual realities, God as He resides beyond His male and female manifestations, beyond all frameworks.[2]

The Kabbalists state that the purpose of creation is to bring God's masculine and feminine qualities into a union in this world, God's bridal chamber. In fact, before performing *mitzvot* or reciting prayers, many proclaim they are doing so for the sake of this marriage ("*le-sheim yihud Kudsha Berikh Hu u-Shekhintei*). Another way to say this: the purpose of existence is to bring the infinite down into the finite, to locate transcendence precisely in the mundane.

One doesn't have to look beyond the jacket or back cover of most volumes of contemporary poetry to confirm that achieving this union—although not in a religious sense—is one of poetry's defining ambitions. Furthermore, according to the Hasidic mystics, the union of these two attributes embodies or suggests the presence of God's very Essence. For only God's Essence, which is not confined to the male infinity or the female finitude, can bring the two opposite modes together. This union, then, represents an expression of God's truest self in the place He wanted to be all along, as the Midrash suggests. Perhaps this helps account for the inexplicable and lovely

[1] *Sefer ha-Ma'amarim 5710-5711* (Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 2015), 111-118.

[2] See *Likkutei Sihot* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Volume 3,* 904-905. Here *Atzmut* is described as transcending both finitude and infinity. This dual transcendence—the state of being locked in neither category—is said to manifest in God's ability to fuse the two opposite modes. The Ark in the Holy of Holies, which was measurable (finite) but took up no space (infinite), is referenced as one example expressing the *Atzmut* paradigm.

mystery that surfaces when poetry shines transcendent light on the mundane.

In traditional Jewish life, as noted, this union occurs when a physical being—God's cosmic wife— performs a physical *mitzvah* that draws down an Infinite, male light into the feminine, finite world—a union in God's bridal chamber. Thus, Judaism is a religion whose practices engage largely with the mundane, with physicality. Maria Gillan's poem, "After School on Ordinary Days,"[3] provides an example of how contemporary poetry aims for a similar kind of union—albeit not in an overtly spiritual context:

…After supper on ordinary
days, our homework finished, we'd play
monopoly or gin rummy, the kitchen
warmed by the huge coal stove, the wind
outside rattling the loose old windows,
we inside, tucked in, warm and together,
on ordinary days that we didn't know
until we looked back across a distance
of forty years would glow and shimmer
in memory's flickering light.

Memory's flickering light is, of course, synonymous with the poetry that records and illuminates this everyday scene. It is poetry that deems the mundane, "the ordinary days"—and not necessarily the exalted moment—a worthy subject, perhaps the most worthy of subjects. As Rabbi Y.Y. Schneersohn reminds us in Chapter One of "*Basi le-Gani,"* the divine request for a Sanctuary reads, "Make for Me a Sanctuary, and I will dwell in them," while it should read "dwell in it." The use of the words "in them" teaches that true construction of a Sanctuary entails each individual making his or her mundane life and surroundings into a place where the divine dwells. At least in a humanistic sense (but possibly in a spiritual one, too), Gillan posits that the poem's setting, the tenement kitchen of the speaker's childhood, is a kind of Sanctuary, and the ordinary is filled with light.

However, in many cases, poetry doesn't stop at merely illuminating the everyday. Often, it records life's hardships and darker moments, presenting them as they are—unillumined, non-transcendent. (Here, one might consider the work of poets who stem from the confessional school of poetry). In this sense, contemporary poetry may align itself more with the feminine finite than the masculine, sublime infinite. And this, the Hasidic mystics might say, is to poetry's credit. For Hasidic mystical thought suggests that even without a coupling with the infinite male light, the feminine finite realm can reflect and hold God's Essence.[4]

The Mystics describe two ways of understanding this: The Higher Unity and the Lower Unity. In the Higher Unity, God's Oneness prevails because that which exists in the upper spiritual realms does not sense itself as separate from God, but as a mere extension—like light shining out of its source, or perhaps like light still within its source. As alluded to earlier, this is the Infinite male perspective, called the Higher Unity. The Lower Unity occurs in the finite realm, where despite the world's perception of being a separate "other," the Kabbalists say, it too is a mere extension of Godly energy; the world is constantly re-spoken into existence, and would revert to nothingness if this were not so.

Nonetheless, the Hasidic mystics often identify the Lower Unity as the superior one, the unity that most reflects God's Essence. How so? In this unity, even the finite beings that perceive themselves as other—as independent from Divinity—can come to recognize from their very position of otherness that all is an extension of God's speech, a product of His continuous and underlying creative energy.

Thus, in the Lower Unity, even the existence of otherness does not contradict the notion that God is the only thing that truly exists.[5] Furthermore, the seemingly separate self's acknowledgement of God as the one true existence constitutes another paradox (in addition to the coupling of the masculine infinite and the feminine finite lights noted earlier), a balancing of opposites that suggests the presence of God's Essence. Here, however, the Essence paradox occurs even without the marriage to the infinite male illumination.

As such, the recognition may not prove as spiritual or luminous, for it is rooted in the finite, but for this very reason it is most profound and paradoxical; it is unity in disunity. And it is real and of this world. For me, this recalls poetry's tendency to meet life's difficult truths head on—unadorned—to acknowledge the "disunity." And yet, entrenched in that very position, it insists on a kind of order or redemption, but not via transcendence or rising above the imperfections, or even by shining light downwards on them. In other words, if a truth or underlying beauty is arrived at at all in contemporary poetry, it must often come through—must take into account—the world's darkness, its "disunity." As in the mystical Lower Unity, this acknowledgement brings poetry to a deeper, more profound truth. It is unity in disunity, as opposed to the expected

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[3] Maria Mazziotti Gillan's "After School on Ordinary Days" appears in her poetry collection *Italian Women in Black Dresses* (Toronto: Guernica, 2002).

[4] Some background: Kabbalah and Hasidic thought take literally the verse "There is nothing but [God]" (Deuteronomy 4:35), believing Him to truly be—at least from one vantage point—the only thing that exists. See *Likkutei Sihot* of The Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Volume 4,* pages 1334-1335. Also see these pages regarding the distinction between the Higher Unity (unity from above) and the Lower Unity (unity from below). Here, counterintuitively, the Lower Unity is deemed superior.

[5] According to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, this Lower Unity is alluded to in Deuteronomy 4:39, while the Higher Unity is alluded to in 4:35. The Rebbe notes that both verses are similar in that each implies, "There is nothing else" but God. However, in asserting this, verse 4:35 omits the words "Heaven and Earth," and thus alludes to the Higher Unity where no sense of separate existence - no "Heaven and Earth" - prevails. Existence is virtually erased in the Higher Unity, as it were. In addition, 4:35 opens with the words, "*You were shown* to know...there is nothing else," suggesting a revelation from above, from the spiritual or Infinite realms. (In fact, this verse refers to the revelation at Sinai, when, it is said, the Infinite divine light shined so powerfully it overwhelmed finite reality, and the Jewish people's' souls, therefore, flew out of their physical bodies). In contrast, the Rebbe adds, 4:39 makes mention of Heaven and Earth, and, thus, alludes to the Lower Unity in which existence does not need to be erased (Heaven and Earth remain in the foreground) for divine unity to prevail. And here, rather than the revelation from above that characterizes the Higher Unity, 4:39 opens with the command that the Jew, using his or her finite consciousness, come to his or her own recognition of God's unity. Verse 4:39 reads, "*You should know*...there is nothing else…" See *Likkutei Sihot* of The Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Volume 4,* pages 1334-1335.

unity of the Infinite, where divine oneness dominates because all is swallowed in divine light.

Let me conclude with one of my own poems which, I believe, operates within the poetic tradition of "the Lower Unity" and also employs mystical allusions.

You Stood Beneath a Streetlight Waving Goodbye[6]

You stood beneath a streetlight waving goodbye
the night we dropped you off in the city
for our daughter's appointment
with one of the country's top surgeons.
And as we drove away, the other children and I
waved back at you,
until, because of the angle and the distance,
your forms disappeared in the light.

And I remembered how,
in college,
I would turn back each evening
as I stepped out of your apartment building.
You would poke your young beautiful face
out the second story window,
your arm cutting the cool night air
as you waved goodbye.

And I would walk backwards
over the frosted grass
until I reached halfway beyond the next building,
where, each time, from that distance,
I watched the streetlamp's light
suddenly consume your dark arm and face.

The mystics say creation begins
as a luminescent point,
a flash of wisdom,
containing all that will be
but in an abstract, potential form.

All those nights,
when we were so young,
when your body became a ray of light,
I could not have imagined
the life that lay ahead of us a decade later.
Two boys and two girls,
one who cannot hear.
All of us in a small apartment.
Each with needs as enormous as mansions.

Sometimes, I am afraid you will wave goodbye
and turn away from our life together,
that a man who can make things easier
has been waiting
ever since the mystic's luminescent flash,
growing ever more real and hungry for you
until one day he will materialize
as you load groceries into the van.

I would like to go back to the young woman
waving at the window to the man walking backwards.
I would like to show her this life,
to say she is free to go,
and to ask her if she will still take me.

Song of the Sea: Making a Space for Joy and Sorrow

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Five months into the pregnancy, our twins were diagnosed with a rare disease.[7] Despite our best attempts to intervene and remedy the situation, the condition caused a host of complications. It eventually led to their premature delivery and deaths just a short time later. The weeks and months that followed were extraordinarily difficult. In the aftermath of tragic loss, one quickly discovers that despite attempts to move on, a reservoir of pain remains just underneath the surface. It doesn't take much to breach the fragile barrier that holds grief at bay. Perhaps it is the sight of a newborn child or a family with young twins playing together. When the pain breaks through, it threatens to overwhelm and drag one beneath its depths. As I approached the first *yizkor* after their passing, my fear was that this too might become one of these moments. I did not want that to be the case. The last day of Pesah is a day of rejoicing and a day in which we dream of redemption. I was fearful it would become another moment when the world drains of its color and the weight of my loss nearly suffocates me.

Rabbinic commentators have long noted the incongruity of reciting *yizkor* on the festivals. If the *mitzvah* of *simhat yom tov* nullifies all public expressions of mourning, how is it possible that we can dedicate time on the festival to remembering our pain and loss? Various answers have been suggested[8], but I would like to propose the following: We recite *yizkor* on festivals in order to recognize that true joy must always live side by side with our loss. No matter how joyful we may be on the festivals, our pain cannot be erased, and attempting such emotional erasure would be nothing more than self-deception. Rather, experiencing authentic joy requires us to acknowledge our pain. The festivals inevitably force us to confront this reality, for what other time is there on the Jewish calendar that we yearn more to be with our loved ones?

This notion is beautifully expressed in a profound reading of the Song of the Sea offered by Avivah Zornberg[9]. Her essay, "Songline Through

[6] "You Stood Beneath a Streetlight" appears in *Two Worlds Exist* (Asherille, N.C.: Orison Books, 2016).

[7] This essay was originally delivered as a *yizkor* sermon on the last day of Pesah. It took place just a few months after the loss of our twin boys, who had been born extremely premature and failed to survive.

[8] For example, according to the Levush (*Orah Hayyim* 490) *yizkor* is recited on the last day of *yom tov* because the torah reading for that day is "*kol ha-bechor*." This sections includes a call for those making *aliyah l-regel* to bring an offering or gift of some kind, which was later interpreted as an injunction to give *tzedakah*. From this developed the practice to make a pledge for *tzedakah* on the last day of the festival which would often be done in the memory of a loved one.

[9] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "Songline Through the Wilderness," in *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001).

the Wilderness" helped shed light on my own experience and allowed for me to look at the Biblical narrative in a radically different fashion. The standard approach to the Song understands it to be an expression of unambiguous joy. When all hope appeared lost, when the Jewish people faced the dark waters in front of them and Pharaoh's army at their backs, God miraculously split the sea and created a path for the Jewish people to walk forward. The Egyptians pursued them, only to perish as the ocean waves came crashing down upon them. After hundreds of years of slavery, the Jewish people finally witness the vanquishing of their oppressors. At this climactic moment (Exodus 14:31), "the Jewish people see the great hand that God inflicted upon the Egyptians, they are in awe of God, and they have faith in God and Moshe, His servant." God has utterly proven Himself. Their tormentors had been punished. All of their pain and suffering had been washed away by the waters of the Red Sea. As slaves, all they could utter were unarticulated cries of misery, but now they are able to find the words to sing with pure faith and joy. That this interpretation is both beautiful and appealing is beyond question; We all yearn for the moments when we can finally let go of our pain and embrace only the good. This desire is at the heart of all our prayers for redemption and it is particularly appropriate for the end of Pesah.

But there is another way to read this story. It is challenging, but better suited to the difficult reality of living in an unredeemed world. In her essay on the narrative, Zornberg cites the striking opinion of Rabbi Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, the nephew of the Netziv, who argues, that in fact, the Jewish people did not sing after having emerged victorious from the Red Sea. Instead, they sang while still marching through its waters pursued by Pharaoh's army. If this is indeed the case, Avivah Zornberg points out, then the Song of the Sea cannot be understood as a song of pure joy and triumph, but rather as a song fraught with tension. The Jewish people must sing in full view of their oppressors. They must sing while their future is still uncertain, wondering whether they will indeed make it to the other side. The song does not deny their pain. Instead, they must find the strength to sing while still bearing the psychological wounds of slavery. Under these circumstances, the Song of the Sea must embody the complex reality of joy and pain living side by side. Until the final and complete redemption takes place, joy and pain have no choice but to co-exist. If this was true for Jewish people at the Red Sea, how much more so for us. Even on the festivals, days of rejoicing, we carry our losses with us. To deny our pains would be inhuman, and in doing so, we would fail to experience the true joy that we are called to feel on these days.

These themes are also evoked by the contemporary poet Christian Wiman in his startlingly powerful spiritual memoir, *My Bright Abyss*. The book chronicles his cancer diagnosis along with the slow and painful process of treatment. It captures his struggle to bring together the strands of faith that provided a lifeline for Wiman, and in doing so, it offers a meditation on what it means to live life when death stares one in the face. The author is keenly aware that even after recovery, the agony of such an experience leaves an indelible mark on us. He writes, (*My Bright Abyss* p. 19):

> Sorrow is so woven through us, so much a part of our souls, or at least any understanding of our souls that we are able to attain, that every experience is dyed with its color. That is why even in moments of joy, part of that joy is the seams of ore that are our sorrow. They burn darkly and beautifully in the midst of joy, and they make joy the complete experience that it is. But they still burn.

When we recite *yizkor*, there is a part of our souls that burn. However, that doesn't prevent us from singing. In fact, if we recognize that the Jewish people sang while still marching through the Red Sea, we come to understand another important truth: There are times when we sing not as a result of our joy but rather to serve as a lifeline that prevents us from drowning. In the same essay on the Song of the Sea, Zornberg quotes a teaching by Rebbe Nahman of Breslav[10], a religious thinker deeply familiar with the spiritually devastating impact of pain and loss. His writings are full of references to the presence of sadness and depression within the spiritual life. He understood, Zornberg writes, that

> When one enters this wasteland a sense of worthlessness vitiates all capacity to live and to approach God. The objective facts may well be depressing; introspection may lead to a realistic sense of inadequacy and guilt. But this then generates a pathological paralysis, in which desire becomes impossible.

According to Rebbe Nahman, the only way to remove oneself from such a situation

> is a kind of spiritual generosity- to oneself as well as to others. One should search in oneself for the one healthy spot, among the guilt and self-recrimination. This one spot, which remains recognizable, must exist. If one reclaims it, one then has a point of leverage for transforming one's whole life.

This teaching is based on a verse from Psalms (37:10) "A little longer (*V-od*) and there will be no wicked man; you will look at where he was and he will be gone." Instead of "a little longer" as in a moment of time, Rebbe Nachman reads this *V-od* as the one place where goodness and joy can still be found within us.

It is the role of song to help us find that one place, and then another. Once we are able to find one note, the power of song connects us to more and more. Zornberg further explains that through

> [d]rawing those fragmentary, disjointed moments into connection with one another, one creates a song: a way of drawing a line through the wasteland and recovering more and more places of holiness.

In perhaps the most powerful words of the entire essay she notes that

> [m]usic arises from joy, but the power of true singing comes from sadness. In every *niggun* there is the tension of the struggle between life and death, between falling and rising… the thin line of melody selects for goodness and beauty but it is given gravity by melancholy…

She concludes by observing that for Rebbe Nahman, "song opens the heart to prayer." He cites another verse from Psalms, "I will sing to my God while I exist (*be-odi*)- "with my *od*, with that surviving pure consciousness of being alive."

[10] *Likkutei Moharan* 282.

Rebbe Nahman's teaching is an important lessons for Pesah, a holiday of song. During Pesah we sing *Hallel*. We sing at our *seder*s. We read the Song of Songs and the Song of the Sea. All these different songs reflect the tremendous joy that is a fundamental part of the holiday. But, we should not forget that they are also songs of complexity through which we can also hear the harmony of pain and loss.

We lost our twins just days before *Shabbat Shirah*, the Sabbath of Song, when the Song of the Sea is read. At the time, I found comfort in a *midrash* that during the Song of the Sea, even the babies still inside their pregnant mothers raised their voices in song with the Jewish people.[11] It enabled me to realize that even in the short time that our twins were present in our lives, they too were part of the Jewish people. They contributed their voices if only briefly to the Divine symphony that we strive to sing. Rebbe Nahman teaches that even their absence is part of the song. Absence when consciously remembered creates its own unique form of presence, and if we listen closely, we can hear how even the absence of our loved ones adds to the harmony of the Jewish people.

Why is it that we recite *yizkor* on *yom tov*? On the one hand, we do it in order to acknowledge that our pain must have a seat at the table with our joy. But we are also permitted to allow ourselves to dream of a day when we will celebrate our holidays without *yizkor*. We dream of a day when our pain will be washed away and our scars will finally heal. We dream of redemption, a dream deeply appropriate for the last day of Pesah. We dream of the day when we will gather with all our loved ones, those both present and absent, in order to recite the words from the *seder*. As it says in the *Haggadah*, we will sing in order "to thank, praise, pay tribute, glorify, exalt, honor, bless, extol, and acclaim God who has performed all these miracles for our fathers and for us. He has brought us forth from slavery to freedom, from grief to joy, from mourning to joy, from darkness to great light, and from subjugation to redemption." On that day we will finally set aside our pain and loss to recite a new song before God, Halleluyah.

Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's Love Song on Jewish Self-Identification for the 7th day of Pesah

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Few poems of Medieval Hebrew have left as lasting an impact on Jewish law, prayer, and custom as Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's "Yom Le-Yabasha," the *geulah* piyyut written for the seventh day of Pesah. In the code of Jewish Law *Levush Malkhut,* Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe discusses the recitation of this piyyut on five different occasions: the seventh day of Pesah, on Shabbat Shirah, on the eighth day of Pesah (either each year, or at least when a circumcision is held), on Yom Kippur which coincides with a circumcision, and on any Shabbat that coincides with a circumcision (490:6-9, 584:3, 621:2, 685:1, 698:4,11; see also Mishnah Berurah to these locations). Though today the recitation of this piyyut has fallen out of favor in many congregations, it remains the most commonly recited of all the mostly forgotten piyyutim, still printed in many Birkonim, and in many editions of the standard daily siddur.[12]

"Yom Le-Yabasha" is a fine example of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's poetic genius. The greatest poets can write and operate within conventional and previously established genres, while also breathing new life into those genres by changing expectations and opening new avenues of expression within them. For example, though the Sonnet as a literary form obviously existed before William Shakespeare was born, the greatness of the bard lain in his ability to craft the Shakespearean Sonnet, which conforms to but also adapts the expectations of the Petrarchan Sonnet. This essay considers Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's advancement and development of the *geulah* genre of Hebrew poetry. We will consider the expectations of the form, and the way "Yom Le-Yabasha" transforms and revitalizes the genre by adding a dimension of passionate Jewish self-identification to the preexisting themes of passive longing for return and love.

The Genre of the *Geulah* Piyut

Hebrew liturgical poetry contains many sub-genres based on when specifically in the prayer service the poem was designed to be recited in synagogue. For example, a *selihah* is recited as part of the *selihot* prayers on fast days or the start of the year, a *yotzeir* is recited in the *Shaharit* blessing of "*Yotzer ha-Meorot*," and a *mussaf* poem is recited at *Mussaf*. The *geulah* genre is a specific type of liturgical poem which conventionally contains four elements: (a) the song is written and designed to be recited on Pesah, (b) the song's theme is redemption and is intended to be recited as part of the blessing of redemption just before the *Amidah*, (c) the song's tone is one of intense longing for that redemption, addressing G-d directly, frequently in the Vocative, (d) the song quotes extensively from "*Shir Ha-Shirim*," the original song of the Jewish people's longing, love and yearning for a renewed, redemptive relationship with our Creator.

Most Mahzorim and some siddurim print three major *geulah* piyuttim for the first three holy days of Pesah (the first day, second day, and Shabbat Chol Ha-mo'eid), written by three major tenth century Rabbis, Rabbi Shlomoh Ha-Bavli of Rome, his student Rabbi Meshulum of Lucca, and Shimon Hagadol of Mainz, respectively. All three quote from *Shir Ha-Shirim*, as is fitting for the holiday of Pesah, and begin with the words "Berah Dodi," "Run O My Beloved!," a quote from *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

Writing in twelfth century Spain, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi makes sure to follow all four elements of the *ge'ulah* genre in his poem, but then adapts the genre and thereby maximizes the impact of the poem.

(a) **The poem is designed to be recited on Pesah.** Ha-Levi deftly begins the poem by connecting it to the seventh day of Pesah with the words "*On the day* on which the depths were turned to dry land, the redeemed ones [the Jews] sang a new song." The imminence of the

[11] *Sotah* 30b.

[12] For example, it is printed in the standard Artscroll *Kol Yaakov* Siddur (1984) on page 214 and 712. It is also the only *piyyut* given prominence in the Koren Pesah Mahzor (pages 486-497), and included in all three editions of the Rabbinical Council of America siddur. The author has attended congregations where Yom Le-Yabasha is recited on the seventh day of Pesah his entire life, and it is still sung at the Maimonides Kehillah each year on the seventh day of Pesah, [see Mendi Gopin *Davening with the Rav*, (Ketav:2006), 119]. It is a prominently sung song at Yeshivat Har Etzion.

phrase "on the day" signals that the intended time for the recitation of the poem is the seventh day of Pesah. Later quotes from *Shir Hashirim* further cement the poem to this holiday.

(b) **The song's theme is redemption and is designed to be recited just before the Amidah of Shacharit.** Ha-Levi locates the song within the redemption blessing in two ways. The first is through the refrain of the poem, "*shira hadasha shibehu geulim*," which is a quote from the blessing of redemption. The second is through the final stanza, which ends with the phrase from the Song of the Sea, "Who is like you Hashem," a phrase which also appears in that blessing of redemption. The content of the song also focuses on the plea that G-d redeem His people.

(c) **The song's tone is one of longing for redemption and uses the second person or the Vocative.** The poem directly addresses G-d in the second person, and asks Him to redeem His people

(d) **The song quotes from Shir Ha-Shirim.** The penultimate verse of the nine verses ends with poetic image from Shir Ha-Shirim "and the shadows will run away" (2:17 and 4:6), which also operates as a metaphor for redemption, when the shadows of exile flee. Also, the song's seventh verse begins with the rare phrase from *Shir Ha-Shirim* "Mi Zot" ("Who is she" 3:6 and 8:5), the song refers to the Jewish people as the Shulamit[13] in the second verse (Shir Hashirim 7:1 [twice in that passuk]), and the song makes allusion to the verse "feet that looked nice in shoes" (7:2).[14]

The greatness of Ha-Levi lain in his adaptation of the genre to maximize the appeal of the liturgical poem. In typical Spanish style, Ha-Levi adds a meter to the song (five major long syllables per line[15]) and also switches to the complicated double-rhyme system of the Shir Ezor, or belt song, with the first three lines of each stanza rhyming with each other, and the last line rhyming with the refrain (as well as the last two lines of the first stanza). In contrast, the other examples of the *geulah* genre had a simple rhyme for each stanza, without rhymes interlocking with the refrain. The addition of meter and rhyme are not necessitated by the *geulah* genre; they are additions by the master poet.

Also, rather than continuing the now well-used introduction of the other *geulah* piyuttim, "Berah Dodi," Ha-Levi begins his poem with "Yom Le-Yabasha," words that bring to mind the specific focus on his unique topic, the seventh day of Pesah. Rather than focusing merely on the longing of the Jews for their beloved, the song expands the range by also invoking the splitting of the sea. This line also doubles as a pun of Tehilim 66:6, "He turned the ocean (*yam*) to dry land" – with the Hebrew "*yam*" (sea) turning into "*yom*" (day). Thus, the expert poet has begun the poem with a line that is simultaneously (a) a pun and allusion to a Biblical verse, (b) a clear entry into the theme of the past and future redemption, and (c) a clue to the intended liturgical setting for the poem. The initial letter *yud* also forms the acrostic for the name of the poet "Yehudah Ha-Levi."

The biggest advancement and change to the genre lays in the fact that while other entrees to the genre focus on the current exile and a desire to return to the Temple, this poem focuses on the initial redemption celebrated on Pesah and the desired future redemption that the speaker longs for. Formulated slightly differently, the connection between the past redemption of Pesah and the future redemption that the poet longs for is implicit in the other *geulah piyuttim* but is explicit in Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's version.

A Song of Two Redemptions

The content of the song, as well as the quotations and allusions that are part of its form, serve to invoke the theme of two redemptions – the past one of Pesah, and the future one predicted by the prophets. A chiastic thematic structure for the poem focuses the first stanzas and last stanza on the past redemption, and the fourth and penultimate stanzas on the future redemption. The initial redemption from Egypt celebrated on Pesah becomes an archetype for the redemption we hope for today.

The connection in the song between the hope for the future redemption and the past redemption is magnified through the way the poem would be sung in synagogue, as intended by the author. The song begins with a citation from the blessing of the past redemption: the first line reads, "On the day that to dry land the depths[16] were turned, the redeemed ones sang a new song." The words "the redeemed ones sang a new song" is a quote from the redemption blessing, and thus sets the song with the context of the original prayer. At the end of the song, it returns to citing the redemption blessing, this time using the blessing's immediately preceding phrase: "Beloved ones praised you, in song they greeted you 'who is like you – Hashem – among the powerful!'"[17] Thus, the person reciting the poem ends with the very same section of the blessing of past-redemption where he or she started. The prayer for a future redemption is not recited in a vacuum, it is recited within the context of the prayer of thanks for the past redemption; it makes the argument: if we were redeemed once, we can surely be redeemed yet again.

[13] Rhyming "*shulamit*" – the Jews, "*anamit"* – a new poetic name for the Egyptians to fit the rhyme based on Bereishit 10:13, and "*tarmit*," deceit (see Yirmiyahu 8:5). The nature of the deceit is unclear. Note that for Ha-Levi, the rhyme includes two consonants and the intervening vowel (*mit)*, and not just one vowel and one consonant.

[14] The use of the word "*ba-nealim*" is pure poetic genius, as the word appears only twice in the entire Tanakh. Once is in Shir Ha-shirim (7:2) as mentioned, and once is in the Haftarah for the 8th day of Pesah (Megillah 31a), describing the splitting of the sea and the Jews crossing the waters on dry land, with shoes. Thus, Ha-Levi has found the one word that links the Shir Ha-shirim element of the song and the seventh day of Pesah element, and uses it prominently in the beginning of the song. The fact that this word also happens to rhyme with "*geulim,"* the last word of the refrain, is icing on the cake.

[15] Excluding *sheva*'s, *hataf*'s, or the prefix "u" beginning a word.

[16] Hebrew *metzulah*, an allusion to the song of the sea, Shemot 15:5; but the female word (m*etzulot*) is converted to a male form (*metzulim*) to conform with the rhyme g*eulim* and the aforementioned *ne'alim*.

[17] The same four words as the prayer and the Biblical verse, but with the order of the words inverted to fit the rhyme, "Ba-eilim" with metzulim and geulim.

It is within the framework of invoking the power and majesty of the past redemption that Ha-Levi makes his appeal for the future redemption, in the fourth and eighth verses:

> Raise my Flag
> On the Remnant (*nisharim*)
> And gather the dispersed ones
> As one gleans grain
>
> ...
>
> And return a second time (*shenit*) to marry her
> And do not continue to divorce her[18]
> And raise the light of her sun
> And the shadows will flee[19]

For Ha-Levi, the new, longed-for redemption is not *de novo*; it is instead a repeat of the old redemption. The new redemption is like a second marriage, continuing the relationship first cemented in the original time of redemption from the Egyptian exile. The poet deftly works keywords into these stanzas to draw the connection to the Haftarah of the eighth day of Pesah, which is the prophetic paradigm of connecting the two redemptions that he already invoked by using the word "*ne'alim*" in the poem's second verse. Yeshayahu reads:

> And on that day, the Lord will a second time (*sheinit*) send His Hand to acquire the Remnant (*she'ar*) of His people … And He will raise a banner[20] to the nation[21] and gather[22] the banished of Israel, and the dispersed of Judah He will gather from the four far-reaches[23] of the Earth… And G-d will wave his Hand on the Euphrates[24] with the Strength of His Wind, and He will beat it into seven streams, so that it can be tread upon with shoes (*ne'alim*). And it shall be a highway to the remnant (*she'ar*) of His nation that remains (*yisha'er*) from Assyria, just as it was for Israel, on the day that he came up from the land of Egypt. (Yeshayahu 11:11-16)

The prophet Yeshayahu directly compares between the future redemption of the Jewish people dispersed in exile, and the past redemption of the Jews from Egypt, even going so far as to predict that a similar splitting of the waters will take place as part of the future redemption. Similarly, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi alludes to this prophetic prediction in his own song, building upon the Haftara's message.

Thus, though this song is about redemption, it is not merely a plea for redemption. Instead, it focuses on the past caring relationship and past redemptions between God and Israel, as a launching point for the plea of return to the way things were in the past, and to a reunified "marriage" between G-d and His people.

Jewish Self-Identification

The three verses of the poem which serve as the vertex of the chiasmus and the crux of the song (verses five through seven), are perhaps the most critical to understanding Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's broader message about the reason the Jew argues he or she deserves to be redeemed. As is expected for a poet of Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi's caliber, these three verses climax at a line which is designed to be read simultaneously in three ways: (a) as a metaphor for the ways we self-identify as Jews, (b) as an allusion to the promise of the reconciled marriage, and (c) as a hint to the Messianic era which the song hopes for.

The fifth and sixth verses identify two critical commandments which both involve the Jew proactively identifying as a member of G-d's people: circumcision and *tzitzit*. —These commandments are unique to the Jewish people, and they serve as signs that we identify with our Creator and have a relationship with the Divine. —The reference to these commandments, which at first glance may seem irrelevant to the poem, serve as an argument for why the nation should be redeemed. Each of these commandments involves the number eight,[25] which serves as yet another connection to the liturgical setting of the poem: the historical events (ie, the splitting of the sea) [26] and Haftarah of the eighth day of Pesah. These two commandments, circumcision and tzitzit, are singled out because they both accompany the Jewish male at all times.[27] The rhyme for

[18] The parable of G-d divorcing His people and eventually reconciling is a common one in the prophets; see Hoshea Chapters 1-2 and Yeshayahu chapters 49-50. Fittingly to the genre of the song, it is also the central parable of Shir Ha-shirim, as well.

[19] Perhaps the poet has in mind the vision of the new light in Yeshayahu chapter 60.

[20] The image of the banner matches the image of the raising of the flag in the poem, although the flag (*degel*) of the poem is referred to by the Biblical Hebrew "*neis*" or banner in the prophecy, so it is likely the poet did not intend to connect the two images. The use of the word *"degel"* or flag in the poem may connote the banner of Yeshayahu, but may also hint to the *degel* or flags of each tribe which accompanied the desert Jews just after the redemption from Egypt and the splitting of the sea.

[21] Throughout the Tanakh, the word *goyim* can refer to the Jewish people (see Bereishit 35:11). Indeed, for this reason, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik cautioned that the morning blessing should read "*nochri*" and not "*goy*."

[22] Yeshayahu's verb is the common "gather" (*lekabeitz*), but Ha-Levi changes it to "*u-telakeit,*" the verb used for one who carefully gathers stalks of grain (as per the simile in Yeshayahu 17:5). The image of gathering stray pieces of grain conveys a greater care and connection between G-d and the people He gathers than does the verb *lekabeitz*. See also Yeshayahu 27:12 and Rut 2:2.

[23] Translating *kenafot* as "far reaches" not "corners"; see my essay in *Hakirah* volume 17.

[24] At the time of Yeshayahu, most of the exiled Jews lived on the other side of the Euphrates; today obviously the Jews exiled live all over the Earth.

[25] With circumcision taking place on the 8th day, and *tzitzit* involving 8 strings.

[26] It is unclear if Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi was also aware of the Midrashic interpretation that the splitting of the sea took place on the eighth day of Pesach, found in Rashi Bamidbar 15:41.

[27] Menachot 43b; that Gemara also has two other mitzvot in this category: Tefillin - which are not worn on a holiday, and Mezuzah - which remains in the home and not with the Jew. These are also the commandments of Love which Rambam includes in his *Book of Love*,

the fifth verse is the second person suffix ("with You," "Your seal," "Your Name,") in order to further convey and cement the closeness that the nation feels with God. Lastly, the sixth verse begins with the direct imperative addressing the second person "Show their sign[28] to all those that see them!" further reinforcing the connection to G-d.

It is because of this passion and consistency in identifying themselves with the sign and seal of their relationship that G-d should redeem His people. And so, the climactic verse argues:

> **To** she[29] that is so inscribed
> **Recognize please** the word of Truth
> **To whom is the seal** (circumcision)
> **And** to whom[30] **are the fringes** (tzitzit)?

The rhetorical question asks G-d to recognize the nation through the seal and fringes of their relationship, and thereby redeem them. On the surface level, we see how an expert poet, Ha-Levi, uses a line which conveys the content of the message through a metaphor (Glance, O G-d, at our seal and fringes), which fits neatly into the rhyme of the song (*petilim* rhyming with *geulim*) and which also happens to be a quotation of a Biblical verse (Bereishit 38:25).

It is a major poetic accomplishment to use a Biblical verse which simultaneously perfectly folds into the rhyme scheme and which doubles as a metaphor for the content of the verses, —but Ha-Levi intends this Biblical verse to do much more. The selection of a verse from Bereishit 38 is not coincidental. The chapter Ha-Levi quotes discusses an attempt to salvage a broken marriage; the poem is alluding to the relationship of Yehudah and Tamar, who had separated after their first fateful encounter. Tamar uses these exact words to remind Yehudah of their previous relationship, and that she had remained dedicated and truthful throughout (by not pursuing another man, and by not embarrassing him).[31] By using these exact words Ha-Levi calls to mind the story of Tamar, and the dedication of the bride to her future husband; the reader knows that the outcome of the story is that the couple reconciles and returns to each other.[32] Thus, if the *Shir Ha-shirim* model and the discussion of marriage and divorce run throughout the song as a larger parable for exile/divorce and redemption/reconciliation, this line serves as the fitting climax of when a couple does return to each other and continues the relationship. –Ha-Levi is audacious, in that the typical Biblical vision of the marriage relationship focuses on the Jewish people abandoning and forsaking G-d. but situating the relationship within the Yehudah and Tamar story instead places G-d in the Yehudah position of having wrongly abandoned His beloved.

One could argue that Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi even adds one final layer of meaning into the story. This reconciled marriage is not just any marriage; it is the relationship that gives birth to Peretz, the progenitor of the Messianic figure. Peretz's great-great-grandson Nahshon was the proto-Messianic figure and Judaic flagbearer who led the charge into the sea on this very day of Pesah (Sota 37a). Nahshon's ultimate descendent will be the Messiah of the Davidic line, whom Yeshayahu referenced in this holiday's Haftara as the redeemer of the people from this very exile.

A Message for Today

The poem's key line about the fringes and seal should speak to us today as well. For as the Jew glances about while in exile, separated from our Beloved for so long, the Jew asks from whence the merit will come to spark the redemption. Especially today, Jews might look at their own actions, and question whether the nation meets the standard to merit a redemption.

But Ha-Levi gives the firm, confident answer, wrapped with passionate longing. "G-d," we ask, "recognize the truth! Which is the only nation that continues to bear the seal and the fringes?" Who remains connected and continues to wear the mark of our relationship? For that reason, if for no other, we ask G-d to return to His nation and to our relationship, and to redeem the Jewish people, just as He had on this very day so many years ago. –It is not merely an empty hope and prayer for the sea to split again; we now argue that we in truth deserve it.

On the very day when we crossed the sea the first time, we read and pray in synagogue about G-d's promise that in a future day we will once again cross the sea. And it is through the continued adoption of the seal and the fringes, recollections and signs of the relationship that should usher forward the redemption, speedily in our days.

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the commandments which help us recall the loving relationship between the Jewish people and the Divine.

[28] In the context of the song, it appears that the tzitzit are considered the sign, although in truth the Torah never calls them a sign, only tefillin and circumcision. See Menachot 36b, and Semag positive commandment #3. It is possible that this line refers to the circumcision, although this song tends to keep the theme of each verse separate from the others, and also the tzitzit are shown (Bamidbar 15:39) but circumcision is not. It is not possible to argue that the sign here refers to the tefillin since the critical verse that follows only speaks about tzitzit and circumcision. See also Menachot 35b.

[29] Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Levi converts the Jewish people to the female to be consistent with the marriage relationship, by using the quote from Shir Ha-shirim ("m*i zot*"). It is somewhat ironic that the mitzvot described in the song are performed by Jewish males, while the nation is now referred to in the female.

[30] The second, redundant "to whom" is absent in the Biblical verse but is added for the sake of the meter. As a result, three of the four lines in this verse have the word "*le-mi*". The words from the verse in Bereishit that this line reworks are bolded in the translation above.

[31] In the Biblical original the seal is Yehudah's signet ring and the fringes his garment; and so the seal is *literal* and not a *metaphor* for the circumcision.